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THE BEACH HAT

ROBERT HENRI

ROBERT HENRI—AN APPRECIATION

BY OLIVER S. TONKS
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THE completion in the spring of 1915 of the new Art Gallery, Taylor Hall, at Vassar College made it possible this past winter to inaugurate the custom of monthly exhibitions of paintings by old and modern masters. One of these was a collection of fifteen pictures by Robert Henri, selected by the artist, which proved most popular. Of these fifteen paintings, two were nudes,

one a street scene, two views in Ireland, while the remainder were portraits.

Knowing Mr. Henri's preeminence as a portrait painter there is a tendency to confine one's attention to this phase of the artist's talent. But if one yields to this impulse an injustice is done, for the "Street Scene" shown in this exhibition was a convincing presentation of a smudgy snow-



GYPSY GIRL AND FLOWERS

ROBERT HENRI

covered thoroughfare on a murky, lowering day and showed the artist perfectly able to handle themes other than portraits.

Nevertheless Henri is to be remembered distinctly as a painter of portraits. Under his brush the likeness becomes a living reality. One carries away from an examination of his work the impression of "unpreparedness" on the sitter's part. There is, for example, something so instant and alert in the inquisitive twist of "Himself" (reproduced herewith) that it is hard to believe that it was anything but spontaneous action caught, as it were, and photographed by the artist before the sitter had a chance to change his position. The

unembarrassed gaze of the ape-like visage recalls the fresh impetuosity of Hals in his "Mandolin Player" or "Hille Bobbe." The same unconscious pose is seen in "Herself" (also illustrated) which is such a fine companion to "Himself."

The expressiveness seen in all the portraits by this artist is in a large measure the result of a remarkable ability shown in painting the eyes. One might indeed write at length upon Mr. Henri's infinite variety in the treatment of this feature. Sometimes, as in the "Chinese Lady"—to the writer's mind one of the best portraits in the group—the painting is fairly close and well defined. In this instance,



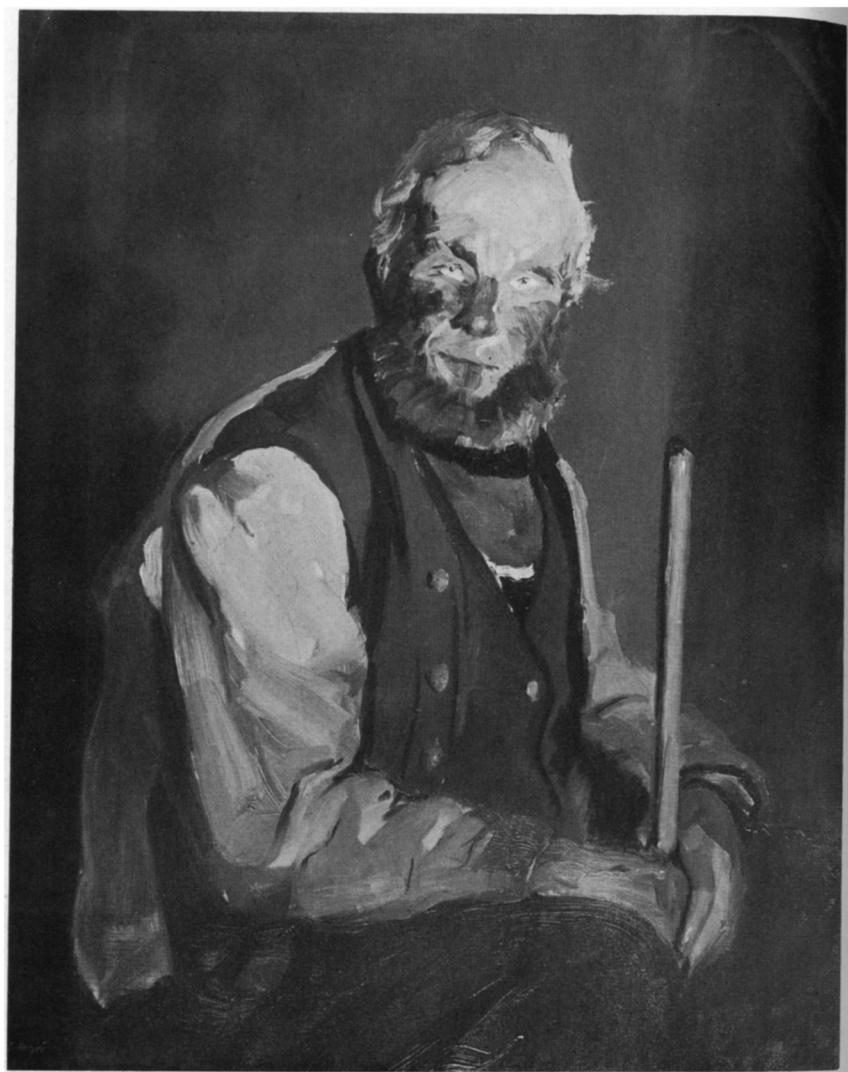
LITTLE COUNTRY GIRL

ROBERT HENRI

since the round, shiny face presents a slick, trim appearance, this is appropriate. But in "Himself" the treatment of the eyes, close at hand, is curiously rough and sketchy so that when viewed from the proper distance the effect may be consonant with the ruddy visage of the old Irishman.

It is in Henri's technique in fact that the critic may find much that is interesting. While, for the most part, he paints in a bold style, which by dashing strokes realizes a finish adapted to being viewed from a considerable distance, on the other hand his intelligence leads him to adapt his form of artistic expression to suit his sitter. He has no cut and dried style which is employed

for all alike. The battered old Irishman he might paint in rough, almost brutal, brush work, but the oily, Chinese lady demanded smoother treatment. What applies to grown-ups concerns equally the portraits of children whom Henri paints with charming sympathy. Thus the "Little Country Girl," sitting at ease in a light which seems like the warm glow of late afternoon, shows a full, ruddy face handled with just enough looseness of brush work to render it soft and rosy. The same loose handling appears in the "Gipsy Girl and Flowers." But in the "Segovia Girl," whose cheeks are smooth and firm, the brush moves with more caution and precision.



"HIMSELF"

ROBERT HENRI

In the problem of painting figures bathed in out-of-door light Henri shows great interest. Those who remember his "Sun-burnt Girl," shown at an earlier exhibition at Vassar, will recall the daring use of hot color occasioned by the figure made ruddy

by the burning sun. The same knowledge of the effect of open-air light upon figures is seen in the "Little Country Girl" just mentioned, and better still in the portrait known as the "Beach Hat." This remarkable picture, showing a woman in a



"HERSELF"

ROBERT HENRI

red sweater and a broad brimmed hat trimmed with deep blue, shows the slashing style which, to the writer at least, suggests the manner of Hals in his impetuous moods. Most painters, of course, of strong personality dislike being compared with

other artists—and no one doubts the strength of Mr. Henri's personality. But it is to be hoped that this comparison may cause no irritation to this distinguished artist. Therefore, to carry on the comparison, it can hardly be denied that in



CHINESE LADY

ROBERT HENRI

the fluid, rapid brush work of the "Beach Hat" there is a strong suggestion of the manner of Frans Hals. This in no wise implies a copying. Rather it means that both men, ready and facile in technique, carried out their ideas with a rapidity and certainty that could express itself in no other fashion than this which leaves the colors juxtaposed and unfused. It is

unquestionable also that such a method of work causes the pictures to carry with greater power than if the colors subtly blended one into the other. So it is in this picture that, when seen close at hand, it presents a startling brusqueness of treatment, but when viewed at a distance its colors fall into their proper values. Further in connection with the artist's method of

working it is fitting to observe that whatever way he expresses himself he always succeeds in giving a tactile quality to his figures. This is particularly true of his nudes.

In the presence of such a collection of Henri's work as this, one is struck immediately with the strength of the artist's color, and, if one may say it, the daring of it. Thus, for example in his splendid portrait of Betalo Rubino, the dancer, the artist has brought in a striking green as a background which succeeds remarkably in causing the orange color of part of the costume to sing, and acts as well as a foil for the shimmering black of her skirt. In much the same mood Henri spread a strong yellow behind the "Chinese Lady." In itself the color was daring enough, but one imagines that the artist tried even further to complicate matters by placing in front of it the red, florid face of the sitter. This feat he successfully carried out in part by warming the yellow

ground with traces of red, and in part by outlining the ruddy face with the black hair and black robe.

On the other hand one would do Mr. Henri an injustice if one did not hasten to say that he is quite as versatile in his range of color as in his brush work. As a fact the picture called "Himself" is a most subtly pleasing arrangement of soft grey, brown and green, and the companion piece, "Herself," is a delicate adjustment of pink, blue and grey.

Mr. Henri in a word stands aloof from the academicians. His style is brusque, direct and sincere. He is not concerned with types which by the conventional standards are called beautiful. Rather with him the beauty of each work lies in its vitality and the way in which it is handled. And yet, while he thus represents a revolt against the mannerisms and suavity of the academic school, he nevertheless is quite as conscious as the academicians of the value of delicate color.

WHAT SHOULD THE COLLEGE A. B. COURSE OFFER TO THE FUTURE ARTIST?*

BY CECILIA BEAUX, N. A., LL. D.

TREATING this subject strictly within its bounds, we are considering a "future artist" who is really going in for an A.B. degree. He is undertaking, with a few variations, perhaps, from the average schedule, to be an undergraduate for four years, with all which that means. . . . He is not a young person who is going to study art at a university.

This being understood, it seems that a very interesting point in the development of education has been reached when such a question has been asked.

At the first glance, there is an obvious answer, and a perfectly just one. Broadly speaking, open doors to education are the hope of the race, and it is the benign act of generous patrons and faculties to wave the artist toward them, as well as every one else.

The trouble is that we encounter paradox the moment we undertake to formulate or confine questions of culture where the Fine Arts are concerned. What an immense satisfaction it would be if we could really catch the secret and turn it over to the most determined bidder.

If, having found a solution, we did not have to explain at once, that it only worked in certain cases, and that the exact opposite was just as true. People desirous of stimulating the best interests of humanity not only do not give up the quest, but are more than ever determined to find the key, and if one undertakes to cite cases where the God-given magic has been independent of any sort of education from without, and sometimes even on its own ground, the educator at once replies, "Can you find any reason to prove that the ignorant and gifted

* A paper presented at the annual meeting of the College Art Association of America held in Philadelphia April 20, 21, 22, 1916.